

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

April 10, 2016; the 3rd Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19.

The First Breakfast

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

And they knew him in the breaking of the fish!

Now, that line is not in the story we just read; but it could have been.

They did know Jesus...they knew it was him, as he broke the fish and gave it to them.

Fish have an important place in the Christian story.

Because of that we still to this day use the fish symbol as a Christian symbol.

According to tradition, Christians, during their persecution by the Roman Empire in the first few centuries, "used the fish symbol to mark meeting places and tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes: According to one ancient story, when a Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both believers knew they were in good company. The initial letters of the words, Jesus Christ of God Son Savior, spell out the greek word for fish, *ichthys*." "As well, water baptism caused some to think of Christians as fish -- Second-century theologian Tertullian put it this way: 'we, little fishes, after the image of our *Ichthys*, Jesus Christ, are born in the water'."¹

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/what-is-origin-of-christian-fish-symbol.html>

All this comes from the Biblical stories. Some of Jesus' first followers and closest friends were fishermen. We have this resurrection story, which in our three-year cycle of lectionary readings, is given to us on the same Sunday, the 3rd Sunday of Easter, that in Year A we hear the road to Emmaus story, when we are told that the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

We are in Year C right now. FYI.

Emmaus is perhaps a better known story, and better loved---I think of the Emmaus story before the fish stories, when I think of my favorite Resurrection accounts.

But fish are important...don't neglect the fish!

So I was not at first surprised to see the report in the *Episcopal Cafe*, an online news magazine for the Episcopal Church, entitled "Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music adds fish to Eucharist for trial use"²

In the midst of a busy work day, I paused to read:

The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has officially released a supplement to the Eucharistic rite, approved for trial use beginning on Easter Sunday, 2017. The supplement allows for the addition of fish to the usual Eucharistic elements of bread and wine.

"Jesus clearly intended not only to break bread with his disciples, but also to give them fish," says a representative of the Commission. In Luke's

² <http://www.episcopalcafe.com/standing-commission-on-liturgy-and-music-adds-fish-to-eucharist-for-trial-us/>

gospel, Jesus reveals himself to two disciples in the breaking of the bread and then immediately confirms his bodily resurrection to all of his disciples by consuming some broiled fish.

In John's gospel, the Biblical description of a fish breakfast with his disciples echoes the wording of our Eucharistic prayers: "Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (John 21:13). Since most congregations celebrate the Sunday Eucharist in the morning, the Eucharist should recall not only the Last Supper but also this First Breakfast.

Congregations may wish to use fish during particular seasons of the church year, or on special feast days. The use of fish in Jesus' post-resurrection meals makes fish an especially appropriate addition to the Eucharist during the Easter season.

It actually took me a minute to realize I was reading this article on April 1st! It is fun to read the comment section to this article...many realized that it was an April Fool's joke, but not everyone.

After all, given the Biblical evidence that fish are important to the Christian story, is the idea of including fish in the Eucharist more surprising than washing feet, as we do on Maundy Thursday?

Maybe not every Sunday, but perhaps there ought to be a "Fish Sunday?" I probably shouldn't say these things in this congregation, as I would not be surprised to show up here one Sunday and find someone broiling a fish in the garden!

But I was glad when I realized it was a joke...imagine the issues...type of fish, dolphin-safe, mercury levels....and more.

It makes gluten-free bread seem really easy!

But fish are important...don't neglect the fish!

We have encountered Jesus with these fishermen long before this scene. Did they remember that first time they met Jesus, when he called them from their fishing to follow him?

It all started with fish..."Follow me, and I will make fish for people." Or as in the KJV, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Did they go fishing now, to take an emotional break from the intensity of everything they had been experiencing...Jesus' death, his resurrection, his appearing to them in the upper room and to Thomas?

Did they just need a break so they went back to what they knew, fishing? But they are not having any luck...no fish.

Then a stranger from the shore calls out, "try the other side."

And they do, and their nets are full of fish.

And the beloved disciple knows it is Jesus.

As Gary Jones states in his commentary on this passage found in

Feasting on the Word, even as the disciples try to take an emotional break from the intensity of it all, there is no going back to how life had been, "For, even as the disciples retreat to their familiar trade, as we might retreat to the office or to the mall or to the garden,

what they ultimately discover is that Jesus is there, and he is waiting to serve and nourish them.”³

Jesus had already appeared to them three times after he had risen from the dead, we are told, but they did not recognize him at first.

But by the time he is giving them the bread and the fish...they know it is him. They keep seeing and recognizing him, in community. They keep recognizing him as he feeds them.

We too need to be in community and be feed the bread of life, eternal life, to see Jesus, to know something of God, to feel the Spirit...strengthening us and calling us to follow.

Something happens for us in this meal of communion and connection, perhaps it is what Thomas Keating said of the the meal of bread and fish that the disciples had with Jesus:

“As they sat in silence consuming the meal, they recognized an unmistakable shift in their relationship with him. A meal together as a symbol of belonging. Before it had always meant conversation, laughter and singing. This was a new level of belonging. Their former relationship with Jesus was coming to an end and a new relationship was being communicated to them at a far deeper level.”⁴

These resurrection appearances kept the group together in those first days when the whole movement might have fallen apart, should have fallen apart.

In our story for today, Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him three times,

³ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 2, Gary D. Jones, “Pastoral Perspective,” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Epub, Loc. 15021 of 19741.

⁴ Thomas Keating, *The Mystery of Christ: Liturgy as a Spiritual Experience in Foundations of Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 326.

do you love me?

Each time Peter says yes...you know I do...and each time, Jesus says,
feed my sheep, my lambs...my people.

The gift that Jesus gave of himself was not just for his first disciples but for
all the world.

Those who had come to know and love Jesus,
such as Peter, were to continue to follow and teach the Way of
Jesus...if it had been an experience for a few only...it
would have died.

Just as today, we see that churches and Christian communities that are
most alive are focused helping each other and people in the wider
community.

When some of us met this past Wednesday night, for the parish potluck
supper, to share a meal and talk about our ministries, one could feel the
energy in the room as we talked about our community...who we are for
each other and who we are for others...we take Jesus' words, about
feeding his lambs, to heart.

Let us pray:

Living Lord, you meet us in unexpected places and surprise us with the
abundance of your love. Feed us by your Word and Sacraments, and fill us
with your Spirit so that we may follow you this day and always; through
Christ our Savior. Amen.⁵

⁵ Taken and slightly adapted from Kimberly Bracken Long, ed., *Feasting on the Word, Liturgies For Year C, Vol. 1, Advent Through Pentecost*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, pp. 154-155.